



Talking with one voice

By Andrew Hedley, director, Hedley Consulting

Integrated marketing communications is the name; clarity and consistency is the game.

Students of marketing communications are inculcated with the need to create compelling, consistent and clear messages that can be directed at an array of targeted delivery channels. In considering communications (whether internal or external) it is crucial to ensure all potential mechanisms and materials, their impact and inter-relationships, are considered and aligned.

Nothing said so far will raise eyebrows or meet with anything other than nodding acquiescence, but the reality for many firms is that achieving this simple goal is anything but straightforward.

A starting point (which in itself proves difficult for a broadly based firm) is deciding what they 'want to be famous for'. Clarity of purpose and objectives are important for both internal and external audiences, helping to contextualise activity and frame initiatives. Partners will generally agree with the idea of preferential investment and business focus, but only on the proviso that their own practice area is the subject of this largess. The idea that the spotlight can shine on others will be resisted, regardless of any commercial imperative or business logic. It is axiomatic that emphasising one area of activity inevitably (and actively) means downplaying others.

From an external communication perspective, this may require a firm to consciously resist promoting parts of its business that are not aligned with its overall objectives. Such actions will inevitably be galling for those affected, and together with other decisions to invest elsewhere, will doubtless hasten the demise of these non-core areas as personnel leave to further their careers with firms more interested in their specific skills. This is not an undesirable result, but it needs to be carefully managed if the firm is not to be seen to be in disarray – and the departures take on the mantle of a public relations disaster! Indeed, singling out a 'we want to be famous for' message is so difficult to address on a practice group or geographic level that most firms fall back on the vanilla topics of client service, sector understanding and commercial acumen in their 'stand out' messages.

Having resolved the core issues on which the firm will set out its stall, an integrated communications approach should use the range of tools at the disposal of the communications function. A mix will typically include advertising, direct marketing, sponsorships,

PR activity, e-marketing, brochures, directory rankings, the personal selling activities of partners and the interactions that clients have with the people who deliver the service.

When considering how much control can be exerted over messaging, tone of voice and consistency, it is clear that some media offer total compliance with the desires of the management team (such as brochures and advertising). Others are channels over which the firm has little or no influence. In this second category would fall media coverage and directory commentaries. Unsurprisingly, the communication that carries the most external credibility is that which is seen to be independent of the firm's influence.

One area of external communication that is often overlooked is the impact that can be exerted by a firm's own people – either as part of an overt sales process, or through the way in which they interact with clients on a day-to-day basis going about their work. This is an area at the nexus of internal and external communications. However, the challenge of engaging members of the firm to commit to its strategy, persuading them to be consistent communicators of the firm's vision and encouraging them to engage with each of their clients or contact touch points is no mean feat.

Of course, by far the most effective and compelling form of communication is not conveyed by what is said, or what is promised, but by what is done. Before making assertions and promises (to client, prospects or employees) managing partners need to be sure they have the means to 'walk the talk' of their words. Too often the gap between expectation and experience is yawning, and the inevitable result is a loss of trust in the communicator. It is obvious that the delivery of a consistent experience is far more challenging than the crafting and enunciation of a compelling message.

Achieving an integrated approach to communications, where channels to market, media and people all talk with one voice, creates the platform of clarity and consistency on which a compelling message and client experience can be built. ■

Andrew Hedley is director of Hedley Consulting and a member of the Managing Partner editorial board. He can be contacted at: Andrew.hedley@hedleyconsulting.com